



# THE **PROMISE** OF **PAIN**

Seven Best Practices for Pastoring Millennials and Gen Z Through the Pandemic



Benjamin Windle

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I'm in pain.

Every day I wake up to read about the radical developments of the global COVID-19 pandemic. I feel anxious. When I read about the elderly dying in the streets in countries that have run out of respirators, I feel despair. I am worried about the economic devastation.

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**We often don't have a vocabulary of pain.**

BENJAMIN WINDLE



TWEET THIS

As a Pastor, I can feel it – we are struggling to change gears. We have gone from auditoriums full of people, energy, worship, connection, noise, handshakes, and an atmosphere of faith, to Sunday services comprised of empty auditoriums and a camera. We know the world is in crises, and our instinct is to want to bring



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faith, and help people to avoid falling into fear. These are very good intentions. But, as I've personally struggled to pivot as a Pastor, I've been wondering if the world is showing more empathy and sensitivity than the church. I'm not just talking about our style and posture, and if we are coming across tone-deaf – I'm talking about the underlying beliefs we carry and if they are serving us well right now, or if this is an opportunity to add a shade to our pastoral approach.

I'm not going to be subtle with my premise of this writing: we often don't have a vocabulary of pain. Sometimes we don't speak human: we speak church. And, in the midst of a pandemic, it's revealing something that I want to take a closer look at as a Pastor and a leader.

I want to distill all of this down to a thought: we have to be able to hold both pain and promise in our pastoring and leading.

We minister from the place of pain, and we take people on a journey to a promise. If we are all promise, to the point we refuse to even acknowledge the pain, we will inadvertently lose our credibility with our listeners, especially Millennials and Gen Z, of whom I have written extensively about in my White Paper.

Why do we often want to rush the dialogue so quickly from pain to faith? Does the tension of the unknown make us nervous?

Do we have room in our theology to truly comprehend the full human experience?

# THE FIRST CULTURALLY DISRUPTIVE MOMENT IN TWO GENERATIONS

For Millennials and Gen Z, this is the first culturally disruptive moment they have lived through. A culturally disruptive moment is where everything we take for granted about our everyday life is significantly changed.

I'll never forget where I was and what I was doing when September 11 2001 happened. It was a moment that changed everything. It was a fulcrum point in modern history. It was more than increased airport security that changed in the aftermath of this event; it became something emotionally embedded in our collective psychology.

However, September 11 was almost twenty years ago. So, from that point, we have two generations that have never faced this level of global adversity. In addition, for most people, September 11 was



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**When you live through  
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TWEET THIS



something that directly impacted other people, at some other place. My grandma is a 4-foot-8-tall food extraordinaire who fled Athens as a child during World War Two. She personally witnessed a war atrocity and mass murder. My great-grandparents lived through the Great Depression (which lasted the better part of a decade). They knew what it was to be poor and hungry. I always wondered why they never took the clear plastic wrapper off their couch, even when they had achieved some business success. Now I feel like I've finally got the answer. When you live through a culturally disruptive moment, it marks you forever.

Culturally disruptive moments have hit previous generations: wars, financial collapses, pandemics, such as the Spanish Flu, natural disasters, famines, genocide, and political turmoil. COVID-19, however, is not happening in some other place or time, nor is it affecting other people. It's affecting you and me.

Life as we know it has come to an abrupt halt.

For me, the 'moment' I realized the virus situation was not just isolated to China was when the NBA cancelled the season. As an avid basketball fan, the announcement stopped me in my tracks. How can the NBA not play?

The shutdowns have spread. Nations have closed their borders. Airlines have grounded their planes. The few professional sports that continued played to eerily empty stadiums before they, too, were closed. Grocery store shelves are empty. At the time of writing, I'm under a mild form of house arrest.

My gym is closed. I can't go to my local cafe with some friends to grab a coffee. No birthday parties. No sports with friends at a



park. I can't worship with my local church community. I have to practice social distancing. I have friends that have lost jobs. Some have lost their entire business. As an employer myself, I have had to downsize my staff. Shopping malls sit empty. Restaurants are chained up. For a guy who often likes to be able to retreat into my own space and read and study, for the first time in my life, I miss simply walking in a crowd on a sidewalk with strangers. The isolation feels unnatural. Normal everyday life has been upended. Suddenly. Deeply.

These are just the immediate social changes. I am also confronted with a constant stream of news from around the world: soaring death tolls, hospitals being overwhelmed, and bodies in streets. It's terrifying.

I saw images of many coffins lined up in a cathedral in Italy. A priest prayed over them. Afterwards, the dead were immediately taken in trucks to a makeshift morgue (the regular one had run out of space). Then, within a few minutes, more coffins were brought in and the priest repeated the process. Imagine the loss to families, and the trauma to health care workers.

It feels like wartime. But, economically, it may be even worse.

I've realized I am in much less control of my life than I thought. This is an uncomfortable truth that I'm struggling to process.

## MINISTER FROM PAIN

The big question is, how do we minister to and lead these new generations that are experiencing their first ever culturally disruptive moment?

Hint: somewhere in our answer needs to be the words kindness and empathy.

For one, we must become fluent in the vocabulary of pain, anxiety, and fear. If we try to change people too quickly, it may come across as insincere and even out of touch with reality.

If we come at these generations too quickly with perfectly versed, rhyming statements of faith, they may be heard as empty platitudes. How do we stand with people emotionally before we try and move them? For me, personally, I want you to share my humanity before you inspire me spirituality. I want empathy and kindness and a moment to linger in the shadows.



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**Our pastoral world view  
needs to stretch into the  
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**I was raised in a faith tradition that has an uncomfortable relationship with pain and suffering.**

**We are good at talking about provision and favor, but we sometimes forget to set a seat at the table for suffering.**

BENJAMIN WINDLE



TWEET THIS

Our pastoral world view needs to stretch into the shadows to include pain, suffering, and hardship. Without it, our salvation message is less rich. What are people being saved from if they have no problems? Why is heaven so appealing if people get all the answers here and now.

I'm a faith preacher. I'll preach on turnarounds, sudden breakthroughs, and divine intervention.

Yet, I've also seen the extreme side of this.

I was raised in a faith tradition that has an uncomfortable relationship with pain and suffering. We are good at talking about provision and favor, but we sometimes forget to set a seat at the table for suffering.

People need to know they are seen and heard.

## **Where is our empathy?**

Expressing empathy and kindness is the currency of authentic ministry to new generations. Out is megaphone ministry, where we project our better, more superior version of faith. Our faith that never stresses, or feels fear, or has cracks in it – that’s for you, and for others. Our faith is strong. Or at least we feel the need to project that, because maybe we are worried that if the leader shows weakness it will erase the confidence people have in us. I think there are new generations that don’t see a show of weakness as a weakness. They read it differently. They see a show of weakness as reality, as empathy, and as a version of human equity that transfers kindness.

Showing my pain to you is a gift. I’m showing the real me.



## THE THREE PANDEMICS WE ARE DEALING WITH:

**1: Viral pandemic.** The worst viral outbreak in one hundred years.

**2: Economic pandemic.** Unprecedented financial disruption in modern history.

**3: Grief pandemic.** People are responding with fear and hysteria.

But, if we step

back and put this through an anthropological lens, it can be seen as one stage in their process of grief.

## WE ARE IN A GRIEVING PROCESS

One of my framework assumptions is that we shouldn't see this pandemic as a problem to solve, but rather a grief process to enter. Fear and panic is simply a first stage in a grief process. We are grieving the loss of our normal lives, and we are grieving the people that have been personally affected by this virus.

We would not walk up to someone who was in the starting moments of a grief process and say, "God is in this – everything will be okay." That is what psychologists refer to as secondary assault. This pandemic has no clear starting point or end, and resembles a lengthy, non-linear process.



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## **The six stages of grief (non-linear):**

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance
6. Meaning\* (this is a new addition by Kessler)

Grief is a complex, messy, non-definable journey. By seeing this pandemic through the lens of a grieving process, rather than a tragic event, it will better position us to understand the stages people are going through. And the person I understand is the person I can minister to.



**THE PERSON I UNDERSTAND IS  
THE PERSON I CAN MINISTER TO.**

**BENJAMIN WINDLE**



# THE LANGUAGE OF PAIN

Juxtapose these words:

Adversity and Assurance

Facts and Faith

Fragility and Confidence

Present and Eternity

Grieving and Healing

Humanity and Scripture

Economics and Provision

These word combinations give more meaning to the idea of ‘Pain and Promise’.

Ministry is a form of leadership. Like all good leadership, the role of a leader is to first come down to the level of the person they want to lead. Come alongside. Relate. Connect. And then walk with. I know that, as I leader, I have sometimes made the mistake of being too far out ahead of the people I am trying to lead. I am still learning to remind myself that the shepherd cannot be too far ahead of the sheep.

Others have written much better material on the topics of pain and suffering, but allow me to bullet point some of my personal biblical beliefs on this subject:

- Humans get sick and don't always get an earthly healing.
- Our world is broken by sin and awaiting final redemption.
- Jesus has paid the price for our sin, but the full unveiling of the story of God and humanity is yet to play out. In the meantime, we still experience pain and suffering.

- God's grace and love is with us even in the midst of valleys and storms, and often in a more profound way than when everything is calm.
- We need an eternal perspective, and without it we will never fully understand 'life under the sun'.

In the stream I was raised in, people almost didn't want to acknowledge they were sick, because it would have been a negative confession, which is code language for don't say what is bleedingly obvious lest God sees you as lacking faith. Like God doesn't already know?

So, people who were sick, in debt, lonely, and/or struggling with anxiety or depression had to keep a positive confession. And I'm all for positive. But there is a fine line between faith and being fake.



Denial and faith are not the same thing. Faith starts with the reality of the facts. Jesus told us we would have troubles: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

To me, a faith confession only works when I start from my place of pain. After all, if we refuse to acknowledge and embrace our human experience, what are we believing in God’s help for?

I’m sick, so I schedule a visit to the doctor. The awareness and acknowledgement of the need triggers the step towards the solution. If I refused to acknowledge the need – I’m not sick (even when I am) – I simultaneously eliminate my necessity for a solution.

So, in that sense, the acknowledgement of the need brings us closer to the answer, not further away. Acknowledging our pain (our need) is a spiritual act, as it brings us close to God. The acknowledgement is the trigger. Could it be that a greater awareness of our humanity makes us more spiritual? Could it be that a greater vulnerability in our communication brings greater credibility to our audience? Could it be that our fear actually makes us more full of faith, not less?

## PAUL'S WRITINGS ON PAIN

Paul writes extensively on human suffering and God's providence within it. 2 Corinthians 11 is a great example of a Pauline perspective on how our faith should intersect with human pain. However, before I comment on that, perhaps a more common snippet of Paul's writings, which is quoted, is Romans 8: "all things work together for good to those who love God..." During hardship, sometimes everything in us is dying to just quote Romans 8. Just remember what the 'all things' were. The 'all things' were problems. If we misunderstand a scripture, we may misunderstand an IDEA. A fuller reading of Paul's teaching on suffering and an eternal perspective is needed, but even if we just isolate our focus to this one chapter (Romans 8) and ask the question of context.



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TWEET THIS

Here are some specific pain points Paul mentions in this one chapter alone:

- Sufferings of this present time.
- Groaning of creation.
- Hope that doesn't see the answer.
- Personal weaknesses.
- Trouble and calamity.
- Death threats.
- Persecution of faith unto death.

The ALL THINGS are not good things: they are BAD things. Paul goes as far as positioning martyrdom as one of the 'all things' that, even in death, God can take and use for His purposes. All good – unless you are one of the martyrs! Paul knew that, for he had been through terrible hardships. He didn't see his earthly pain as incongruent to a powerful faith in God. His journey taught him that God can take the bad and orchestrate it into something good. However, it doesn't mean the bad doesn't exist. I have learnt from Paul (also my middle name) that if I view my pain from a materialistic, comfort viewpoint, it will appear disastrous. But, when I see it through an eternal filter, it gives me a wide enough terrain to include the multiple layers of human experience.

Yes, I want to “overcome fear,” “defeat anxiety,” and have “victory over worry.” But, before I overcome, defeat, and conquer, I need to understand, come to terms with, and accept my emotions as normal (not as lack of faith).

Okay, I promised you 2 Corinthians 11. Paul gives a laundry list of personal pain. Whippings. Public beatings. Three shipwrecks.

Imprisonment. Near death experiences. Daily burdens from his leadership role. Within his pain, Paul remains completely attached to the promises of God. His writings are vulnerable, empathetic, honest, and full of remarkable hope.

Are we missing the context: that some of our favourite scripture phrases to quote during hardship are a part of what is known as the prison epistles in biblical literature, and were written from prison?

Or that even in the Hebrews 11 Hall of Fame, it ends by saying, “Others were tortured...” Whipped. Sawed in two. Stoned to death. Hiding in caves in the ground. And that God had something better in mind. I wonder, if we were to write our own Hebrews 11 today, would we write about these unnamed ‘others’? Would we include suffering in our masterpiece list of faith accomplishments?

Paul held pain and promise in the same conversation without any sense of contradiction.



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TWEET THIS





# SEVEN APPROACHES TO MINISTERING TO MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z THROUGH COVID-19

## 1. START WITH EMPATHY AND KINDNESS

Jesus wept may be the shortest verse in the Bible, but don't let that fool you. It is perhaps the most poignant pastoral moment in the life of Jesus. Think of it – Jesus didn't turn up in the midst of their grief process with a dynamic sermon, a big smile with positive statements, or a thoughtless rehash of His own “faith can move mountains” teaching. Before Jesus tried to teach, lead, or help, He walked into people's grief. Physically. Emotionally. Relationally. He felt what they felt. He mourned as they mourned. He didn't try to show Himself to be an unshakable leader whose faith was stronger

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**In crises, we can't skip the weeping and go directly to the leading. The weeping is what gives us emotional credibility to lead the people that look to us.**

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TWEET THIS

than any human suffering. He showed empathy. And it was out of this empathy, in the right timing, at the right moment, that He inspired with faith and led them forward. In crises, we can't skip the weeping and go directly to the leading. The weeping is what gives us emotional credibility to lead the people that look to us. An empathetic tone and posture says to people, I feel your pain – I live in the same world as you.

## 2. BRING PEOPLE INTO YOUR INTERNAL CONVERSATION

Surely I am not the only Pastor in the world experiencing uncertainty? I personally feel anxiety and worry about what is happening in our world. I'm shocked at what is happening. I am processing my feelings and responses to the pandemic everyday. Just today I was sitting with my wife. I said, "This honestly just feels like a movie. I'm trying to be hopeful, but it seems like things are going to get a lot worse." Call it lack of faith, but it is the honest way I felt in that moment. That kind of unfiltered processing out loud is something I am doing on an almost hourly basis with those close to me.

Instead of bringing people your resolved feelings that are at the end of a long thought chain, bring them into the chain early. Processing out loud as communicators means we say thing like,

“Here's how I am feeling right now...”

“I'm in shock at what is happening to our economy right now.”

“I’m trying to keep up with how rapidly things are changing around the world, and

it feels a bit overwhelming right now.”

“This feels like a movie. It’s hard seeing everything I know change so quickly.”

“I’ve got a lot of questions about the future I don’t have answers to, and that is an unsettling feeling.”

Think vulnerable. Transparent. Real. Authentic. Not church voice, church posture, church phrases.

### 3. BE A MESSENGER OF THE HOPE OF JESUS

We may connect at the point of pain, but we carry a timeless message of hope. Don’t hold back. As much as we want to connect to people’s fears, and be vulnerable with our own, our job is not done at this point. We are shepherds. We are carriers of light. We have the power of the Holy Spirit. If the power of the Holy Spirit only works in church services with a certain methodology, now would be a good time to rethink our approach.

Jesus is our pattern, and here are four things Jesus does in our pain:

- Jesus comforts us (2 Corinthians 1:3).
- Jesus never leaves or forsakes us.
- Jesus strengthens us (1 Peter 5:10).
- Jesus doesn’t solve every circumstantial problem in our lives.

## 4. REVISIT THE ACTS CHURCH

In houses. Crowd sourced. Universal responsibility. Authentic. Have we strayed into consumer Christianity? Celebrity Christianity? Convenience Christianity? What about CHRIST-centered Christianity? The Acts church started in houses. So, whilst we are locked in houses, how can we share each other's burdens using technology, take communion as a family, read the scriptures, and rediscover the simple grass-roots Christianity without the aid of our 21st century stage production and church experience? I love the production, but the removal of that from my life gives me an opportunity to lean into other areas I have neglected.



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**Adversity teaches us things that only come to us when we have to deal with the problems of life.**

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## 5. POINT PEOPLE TOWARDS LESSONS THAT ADVERSITY TEACHES

What can this teach us? What should we change when things bounce back? How do we develop deeper spiritual roots?

Adversity teaches us things that only come to us when we have to deal with the problems of life. Here are a few things adversity teaches us:

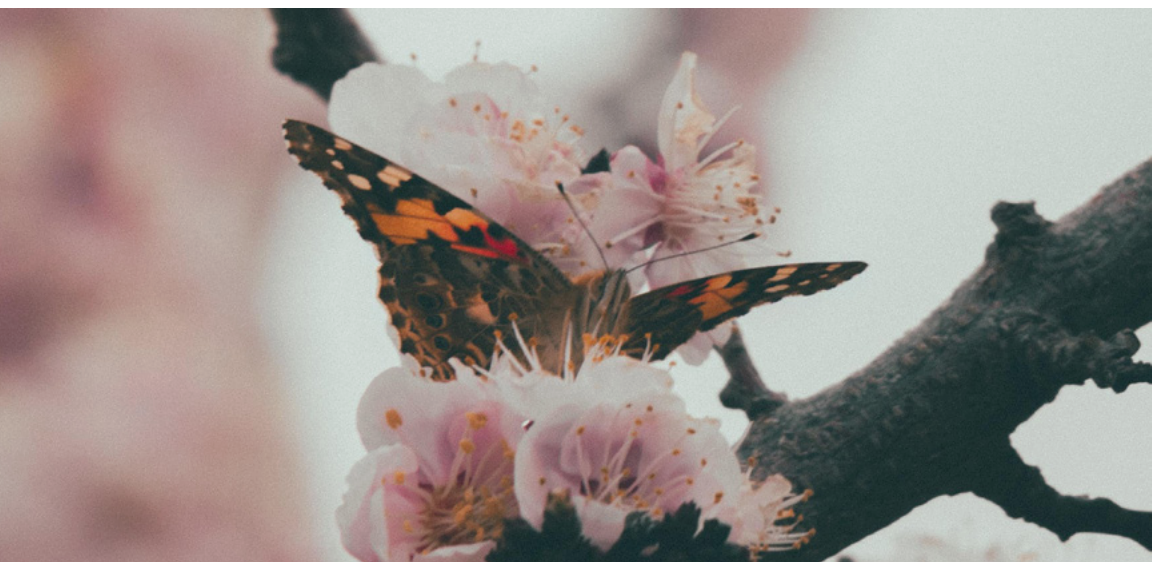
- To be grateful for the simple things in life.
- To slow down and recalibrate our perspective on success.
- To re-examine our beliefs and convictions. Let the root system grow deeper. Develop nuance.

## 6. REVISIT EARLIER GENERATIONS

How did the church respond during the Black Death? How have Christians lived when they were persecuted? How did our grandparents and great-grandparents live?

## 7. A REFRAMING OF OUR LIVES TO AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE OF UNSHAKEABLE HOPE

Faith is not some kind of magic wand that makes us immune from sickness, loss, death, and trauma. It gives us the strength within those things. Faith is trusting in the sovereignty of God when life doesn't go the way we thought. Faith is resilient and will last when it has an eternal perspective where the promise is not just for here and now and life under the sun. Read the writing of Paul and develop a new vantage point of our lives: "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17).





# THE UNSHAKEABLE PROMISE FOR THOSE IN PAIN

We don't want a theology on pain that ends in doom.

Our promise is hope in Jesus. It is a flame that cannot be extinguished. It is a light so bright it cannot be hidden. God is good. God is love. His favor and grace shines before us. He makes our crooked ways straight. He makes us soar on eagles' wings. He is our rock-solid foundation.

Our promise is that there is always hope. There is eternity. There is a peace that surpasses understanding.

We are carriers of the most potent promise, and it has never died. Wars have come and gone. Natural disasters have devastated nations. Tsunamis have taken out entire towns. Plagues. Famines. Catastrophes of every shape and size. And yet the promise of God's hope has never been diluted. It has never been buried. It has never been dulled.

The promise means no matter how dark our human suffering is, God is still on the throne. We win in the end with eternity in mind.

**OUR PROMISE IS THAT  
THERE IS ALWAYS HOPE.  
THERE IS ETERNITY.  
THERE IS A PEACE THAT  
SURPASSES UNDERSTANDING.**

**BENJAMIN WINDLE**



## NEXT STEPS

I'll admit, I can be a worrier. As I'm analytical and try and figure things out, I can expend excess energy trying to map out the future. It is an exhausting behavioural trap to fall into. So, when people ask, are you worried about the pandemic, the honest answer is, yes, I do worry. I worry about the economic impact. I worry for people who are losing their jobs. I worry for health care workers. I worry that hospitals will run out of ventilators. I worry about how this pandemic may affect developing nations. That's just the honest reality. To deny that I think these thoughts would be dishonest, but I ensure that they are not the end of the thought chain. I lean into my faith to be encouraged, see the positive, look beyond the fear, and be strengthened by God.

I think sometimes our struggle to verbalize the reality of hardship is that we are a people of faith and a people of hope. As leaders we are supposed to go before the people and be bigger than the problems in the circumstances of the day.

But, at the same time, we have a new generation that wants to feel our vulnerability and our humanity. In doing so, we do not diminish our credibility as leaders in their eyes. Rather, we open the door to ministry by allowing these new generations to connect with our humanity.

We are still people of faith and we are still people of hope with a message that is bigger than any problem, sickness, disease, or pandemic.

Everything we believe remains, though it is being refined.

God is still on the throne and still in control. Jesus is victorious. We have the power of the Holy Spirit in us. Faith can move mountains. God is the God of the miraculous. Further, at this point in our lives, we are living in a fallen and broken world.

I'm writing from my experience as a Millennial. We often pray pain and adversity away, but the notion that God is going to protect us from pain is not necessarily a biblical idea. It's hard to get around the fact that Jesus went through immense suffering. Sometimes, when we are not spared, we become disillusioned.

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**The combination of both pain and promise in our pastoring and leading is a dynamic duo.**

**BENJAMIN WINDLE**



**TWEET THIS**

If our world view is that God will protect us from loss, when circumstances take a turn for the worse, often we don't know how to process it. Some may say that it is negative or indicates a lack of faith to acknowledge the reality of what is happening. However, it's not negative if we have a robust enough world view that says God won't always protect me from ever experiencing pain or adversity in my life. However, the promise of God to me is that in the midst of my human experience, which will include pain, economic hardship,

challenges, and in the midst of my humanity, during life under the sun and in a broken world, the promise of God, is that God is there and His grace is there to help me endure. His grace is even closer to me during those times.

To a generation that has never experienced anything to the level of what we are experiencing right now, they need to know that the presence of pain, troubles, and disruption in our world does not mean that God is not with us, or that God is not by our side. We need to remember that, in the midst of this, God will reveal himself in amazing ways, and we can mature and grow; our faith can develop resilience. We won't get an immunity pass from pain because we follow Jesus, but we will get a friend that sticks closer than a brother. We will get a Good Shepherd who will never leave us.

This is more than a tragic event. It is a grief process. The combination of both pain and promise in our pastoring and leading is a dynamic duo. To bring encouragement to people, it may feel counter-intuitive to not make all our communication about victory, breakthrough, bold faith declarations, and healing. That can all be in the mix. I'm just advocating we add kindness, empathy, and pain recognition. We will be used by God in the most amazing of ways during this pandemic to help new generations navigate through their first culturally disruptive moment.



## **BONUS: LESSONS FOR MILLENNIALS FROM THE PANDEMIC ON PAIN AND PROMISE**

### **1. Suffering is not caused by God, but is often used for God's purposes in our lives.**

This helps us see the situation through the lens of how can I serve God by serving others? How can I better fulfill the great commission?

But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel.

**Philippians 1:12**

## **2. We learn things in seasons of pain and loss that we don't learn in another season.**

Even though Jesus was God's Son, He learned obedience from the things He suffered

Hebrews 5:8 NLT

## **3. Suffering moves the heart of God.**

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Matthew 5:4

## **4. Pain pushes us towards real community.**

Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:2 NLT

## **5. We are not in control. Our materialism and consumerism doesn't save us.**

It's jarring to see that this is exposing. We must balance our earthly circumstances with an eternal perspective.

## **6. When the world hoards, be generous.**

Be countercultural. When the world sees only loss, forge a different path.

**OUR PROMISE IS THAT  
THERE IS ALWAYS HOPE.  
THERE IS ETERNITY.  
THERE IS A PEACE THAT  
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